

Hedgehog Knowledge

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There's an old Russian proverb that divides knowledge into two kinds. One is the knowledge of the fox, who knows a little bit about everything. Then there's the knowledge of the hedgehog, who knows only one thing, but really knows it well. When we're practicing concentration, we're developing hedgehog knowledge. We focus on one thing and see how far that one thing can take us.

We stay with the breath. We observe the breath. We go back and forth over the breath. There are other topics we can bring in from time to time. Sometimes, you find you need to work with the 32 parts of the body, or you need metta meditation, or contemplation of death for specific problems that come up in the mind. But the home base here is the breath.

After all, it's where the Buddha found awakening. The breath is something that's always there and always immediately relevant to whatever is going on in the mind. If there's anger in the mind, the breath gets involved. If there's lust, the breath gets involved. If there's fear, the breath gets involved. When you're sleepy, the breath gets involved. When you're anxious, restless, the breath gets involved. And although there are times when it's hard to grab hold of the issues going through the mind, it's a lot easier to focus on the breath.

It's like two sides of the same coin. There's the mental side and there's the physical side. We work first on things from the physical side, because it's easier to see and easier to work with.

There's in and there's out. There can be a long in, and short in, or long out, short out. Fast, slow, heavy, light. It may not seem like much to work with, but as you get more and more in touch with the breath, you find that you get a better and better sense of precisely which kind of breathing is good for which kinds of problem in the mind, or which kind of breathing is good for which kinds of problems in the body.

When you feel too cold or too hot, when you feel feverish, sluggish, when there are aches and pains in different parts of the body, you can attack them from the side of the breath and get an entirely new perspective on what's going on in this body-mind complex you have here.

Ultimately, you begin to see that the breath permeates just everything. It's only when we hit the formless states that the breath is no longer relevant, but even to get there, you need to work with the breath first.

So we sit down every day to meditate and start out with the breath. Sometimes you may

wonder, “When does it move on to the next stage?” Well, don’t worry about it. Things develop on their own.

It’s like a fruit ripening. It has to go through its various stages to get to ripeness. And where is the ripe fruit located? In the same place where the unripe fruit was. It’s just that time and moisture and sun and nourishment turn the unripe fruit into a ripe one, without your having to paint it the right color or squeeze it to get the right texture or blow into it to expand it to the right size. These things develop from the proper nourishment.

So you don’t have to worry about what the next stage is. The next stage comes from the stage you’re in right now: doing it properly, getting more and more familiar with it. That’s the nourishment. It’s that quality of familiarity that makes things new or allows for things to become new.

There’s a story in the texts about what the Buddha calls the foolish, inexperienced cow—I’ve always liked that idea. A foolish, inexperienced cow is eating grass on a meadow on one mountainside and happens to look over to another mountainside, and there’s a green meadow over there. The cow wonders, “What’s the grass like over there? What’s the water like over there? Let’s go find out.”

Now, because the cow is foolish and inexperienced, it doesn’t know how to get from one mountain to the other. So it gets stuck down in a ravine and the rocks in the stream. It can’t get over to the other mountain side, and it can’t get back to the mountainside it was originally on.

It’s like the person who, getting into a particular stage in the meditation, wonders, “Well, what’s the next stage like? Let’s go create the next stage.”

You can create all kinds of things in the mind, but they’re not necessarily the next stage or what the mind would develop into if you let it develop naturally. This is why it’s important that you just keep coming back to what’s right here, right now. What develops is the sensitivity that grows through your powers of observation, and it’s the sensitivity that moves you on to the next stage.

It’s not developed by sitting down and reading a text that’s saying, “This stage of jhana has these factors, and then you let go of those factors to get into the second jhana.” It happens more naturally than that.

You stay with the breath, work with the breath. Ultimately you get to a point where you can’t make it any better, and you know because you’ve tried.

Ajaan Fuang gave the example of a water jar. You fill it with water and finally get to the point where the jar is full. No matter how much more water you put into it, it can hold only

that much. In the same way, you get to a point where you can't make the breath any better. That's the point where you stop evaluating the breath and just *be* with the sensation of the breath. Allow the mind to get more and more absorbed in that sensation, and the whole issue of what happened to evaluation, what happened to directed thought: You don't have to think about it.

Just focus on in. Zero on in on the breath and this full sense of breath throughout the body. As you stay with it, you'll begin to get more and more sensitive, and as you get more sensitive, you'll begin to realize that certain ways of focusing are more comfortable than others. So you focus in on the more refined sense of the body that appears there.

Same place. It's not under a different place at all, it's the same body, it's just that there's now a more refined side to what you're focusing on, and you stay with that more refined side. And again, you get more and more sensitive, and you get to a point where because you're more sensitive, you reach a point where the breath just stops.

Now, in doing this you don't have to worry about where the different factors of jhana are. You're just pursuing that question of getting the mind still. Before it's still, the question is: How can you make it still? Once it's still, how can you keep it there? And as you keep it there, you ask, "Is there still something gross in here? Where's the more refined sensation in this?"

That's the beginning of the four noble truths right there. You'll begin to look for where stress is.

At this point it's hard to call *dukkha* suffering. It's more like a sense of stress. Even in this state of concentration, you find that there's some stress. So, what are you doing to keep that stress going? What can you do to let it stop? And you notice, if you're sensitive, that it comes and goes, comes and goes. So just focus in on the point where it's gone, and that becomes the next stage in the practice.

It's only when you leave meditation and review what you've done that you realize, "Oh, this was this and that was that." While you're doing it, you don't need to have a lot of labels for things. It's just a question of increased sensitivity, along with a willingness to let go of all the things that weigh down the mind.

This is where the teachings on inconstancy, stressfulness, and not-self all come in, because as you move from stage to stage, you get a sense of deeper and deeper solidity in the mind from learning to realize that where there's stress, you want to let go. Don't latch on to it. Don't identify with it.

This is why the Buddha said that there's no jhana without discernment. Of course, there's

no discernment without jhana. The mind really has to settle in. Discernment here—in that heightened sense—means transcendent discernment. The mind has to be really still for you to see things clearly. The more still it is, the more sensitive you can be. The more sensitive you are, the more still the mind can become. These two qualities work together.

So we go over the same spot day after day after day, staying with the breath, exploring the sensations of the breath energy in the body, playing with them, experimenting with them, learning how to manipulate them with skill.

Sometimes we manipulate them without skill. You'll learn, for instance, that certain ways of breathing give you a headache, certain ways of breathing make you uncomfortable, and you learn from your mistakes. But because you're going over the same territory over and over again, you really get to know it well.

It's like going back and forth over a road. The more times you pass over the road, the more you know it. You know that here are the good restaurants, here's a good place to stop, these are places where it tends to be dangerous, and these are places where you can relax.

In the old days, they'd take a path through the forest, and you'd begin to realize, well, this is the spot where there are edible plants, and this is the spot where there's good water, because you keep going back and forth over the road, over and over again. If it's a path, you begin to wear it smooth, so you can go more and more easily.

So there's not that much to focus on. There's not that much you have to know in order to practice. You learn the precepts, learn the basic steps for the meditation, and then just sit down and do it. As you do it, you get more sensitive to what's going on, both in the technique of the practice and in what you learn about the mind. That's the kind of sensitivity that develops into insight, into discernment—not the discernment that you read in books, but the real quality of seeing things as they happen for what they are. That's the kind of discernment that can be liberating.

You can recite the names of all the Wings to Awakening and all these other things that you can read about, but it doesn't liberate you. You can memorize these words and talk about them, but unless you sit down and practice, they don't free you.

This is where you really see the taste of the Buddha's teachings. As he said, all of his teachings have a single taste. Just as the ocean has a single taste, the taste of salt, all the Buddha's teachings have the taste of release. But the only way you get to know that taste is to put those teachings properly into practice.

You can read the teachings to gain information, but you can also read them for the way

they perform on the mind, the way they act on the mind. They point you in certain directions and make you ask questions you might not have asked before, help you see things you hadn't seen before, make you realize where you're causing yourself unnecessary suffering. And once you see it's unnecessary, nobody has to tell you: You let go.

And it's in letting go that you're freed.

This is why the Buddha used the image of fire for nibbana, because in those days they believed that a burning fire was both clinging to its fuel and trapped by the fuel because it was clinging. Once it let go and went out, it was freed.

It's the same with the mind. Once you learn how to let go of the places where you're causing yourself suffering, the mind gets freed.

That's how the teachings perform, how they act on the mind to get you to do the practice. Someone said that the practice here is a performing art. It's a skill that you work on, and the skill works on the mind to open things up inside that you wouldn't have seen before. That's the kind of knowledge we're working on.